

EDITORIAL: Churches next to ‘vote’ on BGCT future

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Now, the real voting begins.

Each autumn, the Baptist General Convention of Texas holds an annual meeting to conduct its business. Because the folks who oppose the Southern Baptist Convention’s fundamentalist trajectory have been so effective at rallying their faithful, votes on the BGCT’s most significant actions in the past two decades have been lopsided. Year after year, convention messengers approved proposals distancing the state convention from the national convention.

However, a vote on the convention floor doesn’t necessarily translate into similar action by the churches. Year after year, the churches took “votes” that really mattered—deciding how they would respond to convention actions. Many of them exercised their convention-mandated freedom to make decisions contrary to the overwhelming will of messengers at the annual meeting.



So, now we realize the measure of an annual meeting isn't known until the churches decide how they will respond to convention actions.

Ironically, the most significant action this year took place before the annual meeting even started. The BGCT Executive Board met hours earlier and approved a five-part response to the convention's [church starting scandal](#) in the Rio Grande Valley. In brief, the board voted to:

- Implement “expeditiously and in full” the seven recommendations made by outside investigators who studied the Valley scandal; and create a committee to monitor progress.
- Put teeth in the Executive Board’s church starting guidelines by elevating them to “policy” level, which requires attention by the board’s directors, not simply staff.
- Implement an “internal audit function,” which will provide the board’s directors with specific analysis of BGCT finances and other numerical reports.
- Consider “the feasibility of and the full range of methods for” recovering funds that were misused or misappropriated in the church starting scandal.



- [See complete list of Valley funds scandal articles](#)

- Evaluate whether to turn findings of the convention’s investigation over to “any appropriate government investigatory agency.”

This is a good first step. As stated here previously, Executive Board directors must rise to the occasion and take responsibility for this process. The scandal compounded frustrations associated with churning change and reorganization, and the board’s staff alone does not possess the credibility to lead the BGCT out of this mess. The Executive Board directors must lead publicly and vigorously, ultimately assuring the convention they have taken every step to correct the wrongs and to ensure this kind of calamity cannot happen again.

While they are at it, Executive Board members must secure the BGCT’s democratic practice. During this year’s annual meeting, the chair and parliamentarians ruled out of order a motion calling for the convention to seek a criminal investigation into the church starting scandal—a step beyond what the Executive Board voted to do. They are Christians of integrity and character, and they no doubt rendered what they believed to be an accurate interpretation of BGCT policy and Robert’s Rules of Order. So, the Executive Board should exercise good faith and respond by amending convention documents to enable messengers to vote on such an issue. We proudly proclaim Baptists are the champions of religious liberty and upholders of the priesthood of all believers. But this ruling turns such claims upside down and establishes a governance structure more familiar to Presbyterians than Baptists.

If the Executive Board wishes to re-establish trust, then its members must be trustworthy and humble: Clean up the church starting scandal. Get on their knees and beg forgiveness of our innocent sisters and brothers in the Valley, who were humiliated when their concerns were ignored and were shamed when the scandal became public. And by all means, restore the power of convention-determination—the vote—to convention messengers.

Speaking of voting: Churches will “vote” on the convention as they write budgets and set priorities for 2007. I’ll say it again: The BGCT’s greatest threat no longer is fundamentalism; it’s apathy and irrelevance. If Texas Baptists perceive the convention exists only for itself, no longer looks out for the weak and powerless, and fails to honor our historic heritage and theological birthright, they’ll quit caring, vote with their feet and walk away.

God, help us in this hour; guide us to right and light.

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